

## In brief

### Select committee to investigate

**PFI:** UK government plans to extend the private finance initiative in the NHS is to be investigated by the Commons health committee. The committee's chairman, David Hinchliffe, Labour MP for Wakefield, is a critic of the initiative.

### Safety of yellow fever vaccine questioned:

Researchers are questioning the safety of the yellow fever vaccine after six people died shortly after being immunised with it (*Lancet* 2001;358:84-5, 91-7, 98-104, 121-2). The six victims inoculated with the attenuated live virus vaccine developed symptoms similar to those of yellow fever.

### "Young lives" project launched:

A study that examines the lives of children living in poverty in four developing countries was launched by the UK Department of International Development last week. The project will follow 2000 infants in Ethiopia, Peru, Vietnam, and India for 15 years to study how poverty affects their social, physical, and economic development and their access to health and education. For more information visit [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

**Research ban eased:** John Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland, was told this week that experiments involving human subjects could resume provided certain conditions were met. A temporary ban had been imposed following the death of a previously healthy volunteer during asthma research (30 June, p 1565; 14 July p 69).

### Stem cell transplantation

**against heart attack:** For the first time heart surgeons at Rostock university hospital in Germany have transplanted a patient's own bone marrow stem cells into his heart to grow new heart muscle tissue. The patient has recovered without complications, though growth of new tissue has not been proved. The therapy is based on successful animal experiments that have taken place in New York Medical College and were published in *Nature* (2001;410:701-5).

## Summit fails to agree new deal on world debt

Mike Rowson *Genoa*

At the recent summit in Genoa, Italy, G8 leaders announced plans for a global health fund to tackle infectious diseases, but the G8 leaders committed only \$1.3bn (£916m) to the fund—a sharp cut from earlier plans for \$10bn.

Protestors and police clashed in the streets of the city, and one protestor was shot dead. Meanwhile, inside a ring of steel constructed around the centre of the city, the leaders thrashed out a communiqué expressing their will to cut world poverty and tackle infectious diseases.

Despite the violent protests and chaos in the city, the summit made no new commitments to cutting the debt of the world's poorest countries, even though there is widespread acknowledgment that the deal currently on the table is inadequate.

A World Bank paper released at the end of April had already warned that the current plan for debt relief was not a long term



A group of demonstrators, their hands painted white to symbolise their opposition to violence, protest at the summit in Genoa

solution and that the fragility of the economies of poor countries made them vulnerable to a further build-up of debt.

In 2000, aid from the G8 countries fell to an all-time low. Campaigners from Drop the Debt, the successor organisation to the Jubilee 2000 Coalition Against Third World Debt, denounced the failure of the G8 countries to use their great wealth and power to attack poverty in developing countries, as well as the unnecessary scale and glitz of the summit itself.

Aid agencies have warned that the global health fund should not simply be used for isolated disease control programmes. They pointed out that health systems needed to be boosted in the poorest countries and that the causes of disease outside the direct control of the health sector also need to be tackled. □

Mike Rowson is director of Medact, an organisation of health professionals challenging social and environmental barriers to health.

## Oxfam accuses Pfizer of "moral bankruptcy"

Rory Watson *Brussels*

Pfizer, the world's largest pharmaceutical company, is being accused of moral bankruptcy by pricing lifesaving drugs beyond the reach of millions of people in developing countries.

The charge comes from the United Kingdom based charity, Oxfam, which is campaigning to end the company's single pricing policy and is pressing for more flexible use of patent rules.

In a new report released simultaneously in eight countries, Oxfam has claimed that the company has aggressively enforced its patents in poor countries, driving up the cost of medicines, and, unlike some of its competitors, has not reduced the price of branded drugs.

David Earnshaw of Oxfam Brussels said: "The developing world accounts for only 5% of the pharmaceutical industry's

income. Behaving responsibly in developing countries is not going to cost Pfizer a lot of money."

The report maintained that despite owning three important drugs for infectious diseases—the antifungal fluconazole (Diflucan), the antibiotic azithromycin (Zithromax), and the antiretroviral nelfinavir (Viracept)—Pfizer has shown little flexibility on pricing.

"Where it has patents, it appears to adopt a broadly uniform pricing strategy, and its policy is not to issue licences to generic manufacturers," the report noted. Oxfam acknowledged that Pfizer, which sells seven of the world's top 30 drugs, operates several philanthropic initiatives, but it insists that these are an inadequate response to the health crisis facing poor countries.

Responding to the criticism, Pfizer insisted that medicine

donation programmes had proved to be a durable and effective way to fight disease in the developing world, attracting countries, foundations, individuals, competitors, and academic alliances as partners.

It pointed specifically to its partnership with the South African government in the free provision of fluconazole to patients with AIDS; to its academic alliance for AIDS care and prevention; and to its trachoma abatement programme. It maintained that strong patent protection was essential to make drug discovery possible and profitable.

"Eliminate patent protection, and the incentive for original research is removed and every research based pharmaceutical company becomes a generic drug manufacturer, and the discovery of new medicines for Alzheimer's, cancer, diabetes, malaria, and heart disease slows to a trickle," the company said. □

*Formula for Fairness: Patient Rights Before Patent Rights* is at [www.oxfam.org.uk/cutthecost/pfizer.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/cutthecost/pfizer.pdf)